Parents Convocation  
Aug. 25, 2005  
Remarks by Lyle Roelofs, dean of faculty and provost

Let me add my welcome to that of President Chopp. I am here to represent the faculty of Colgate University and we are truly excited to have your accomplished sons and daughters enrolling at Colgate.

We have said much about the talents and abilities of the incoming class, but you too, are to be celebrated. After all, they didn’t do it by themselves. We also understand the significance of the commitment, financial and otherwise, you are making as their parents. Many of us on the faculty are parents ourselves of students who will go, are attending now or have gone to college and so we understand that commitment personally, as well as professionally. Please be assured that we take with utmost seriousness our stewardship of your trust in us.

Since it is my role as Dean of the Faculty to work to direct and enhance all the academic activities at Colgate, let me tell you a little about how we approach this task. Knowing this will help you as you continue to be involved in the lives of your children during their years at Colgate. Higher education begins, as I will also suggest to your sons and daughters later this afternoon, with finding an intellectual passion: be it Chinese language or sculpture or theoretical physics or the politics of Supreme Court nominee confirmations – being drawn into full participation, enthusiasm and interaction with others who share that thrill.

For me it was theoretical physics… when I came to understand quantum theory, it was as satisfying and invigorating a feeling as I have ever felt. Even if the benefits ended there, a liberal arts education would be life changing and probably worth pursuing, but that’s only the beginning.

A liberal arts education is also the best way to learn the key skills for being successful and making a difference throughout one's life, especially because one learns how to learn, how to be creative, resourceful and curious. David Kearns, the highly successful former CEO of Xerox, said it well recently, “We are reminded that the real challenge of today’s economy is not in making things, but in producing creative ideas. Today the race goes not just to the swift, but to the inventive, the resourceful, the curious. And that is what a liberal education is all about.”

Note that Kearns’s quote shows that this is one of the few contexts in modern American society where “liberal” is not a dirty word, because here it harks back to the original Latin verb, libero, to liberate or set free.

At Colgate we have been paying a great deal of attention to understanding those skills our graduates will need in the future and how they can best be acquired. Some of the issues we are facing and will continue to face in the future include: the increasing demands of
global competition, the interdisciplinary nature of the challenges posed by the hardest problems facing humanity, the increasing need for integrity and a strong moral center in a time of increasing cultural multiplicity, and others.

The answer to these challenges is not to make education more narrow, technical and specialized, but rather to fully exploit the capabilities of the liberal arts approach. Entire books could be and have been written about this, but let me sketch out just a couple of key aspects of how we think about this at Colgate.

First, we take a broad and foundational approach to learning and knowledge through the CORE curriculum, four courses all Colgate students must take, and distribution requirements, which ensure that students have exposure to all the basic modes of human knowing. This builds a structure and a foundation for all human inquiry, including whatever areas of specialization will be chosen.

Secondly, we pay a lot of attention to how students learn best. They learn best by being actively engaged with the material and by working on learning the same way they will work on other projects in the future, with emphasis on communication, learning how to work in teams, learning first hand the value of diverse perspectives and by taking responsibility for their own learning. Our new Center for Learning, Teaching and Research, just opening in a newly renovated and centrally located space on campus, represents not only an integrated academic support facility, but also a center of pedagogical innovation.

Thirdly, knowledge, and particularly its applications to real problems, is highly interconnected and students must experience interdisciplinary approaches to fully realize this. A complete and useful education involves not only expertise in the key ideas of one subject, but also sensitivity to the connections between those ideas. For example, bringing together modes of inquiry from the study of language, culture and literature has given us the new discipline of comparative literature, connecting the ideas of physics and biology has lead to the understanding of the human genome, models of cognition and other important advances in understanding life itself, connecting ideas from science and religion has deepened my own appreciation of both and there are countless other examples of the power and validity of interdisciplinary work.

Colgate is one of the few liberal arts institutions large enough to maintain interdisciplinary programs in many areas that are often found only in research universities.

The connections do not end here. You will hear next from Dean of the College Adam Weinberg how his office has implemented an ambitious agenda in connecting education to how your student will live here at Colgate and later as a citizen of a very complicated world in the future.

Our athletics program, including diverse activities ranging from Division I varsity
intercollegiate competition to a plethora of fantastic outdoor activities, encourages students to make sports, physical activity and fitness an integral part of their lives.

On behalf of the whole faculty, which at Colgate includes all the professors, the librarians and the coaches, all fundamentally interested in the education of your children, let me end by saying again how pleased we are to have the opportunity to be part of the personal growth of your daughters and sons.